
**HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD
STAFF REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION**

Landmark/District:	Mount Pleasant Historic District	(x) Agenda
Address:	17th Street and Oakwood Terrace, NW Square 2621, Lot 798	() Consent
Meeting Date:	December 16, 2010	(x) New construction
Case Number:	11-071	() Addition
		() Alterations
Staff Reviewer:	Tim Dennée	(x) Concept

The applicant, owner and architect Carmel Greer, requests the Board's conceptual review of a proposal to subdivide the vacant lot at the intersection of Oakwood Terrace and 17th Street and construct rowhouses.

Subdivision and site plan

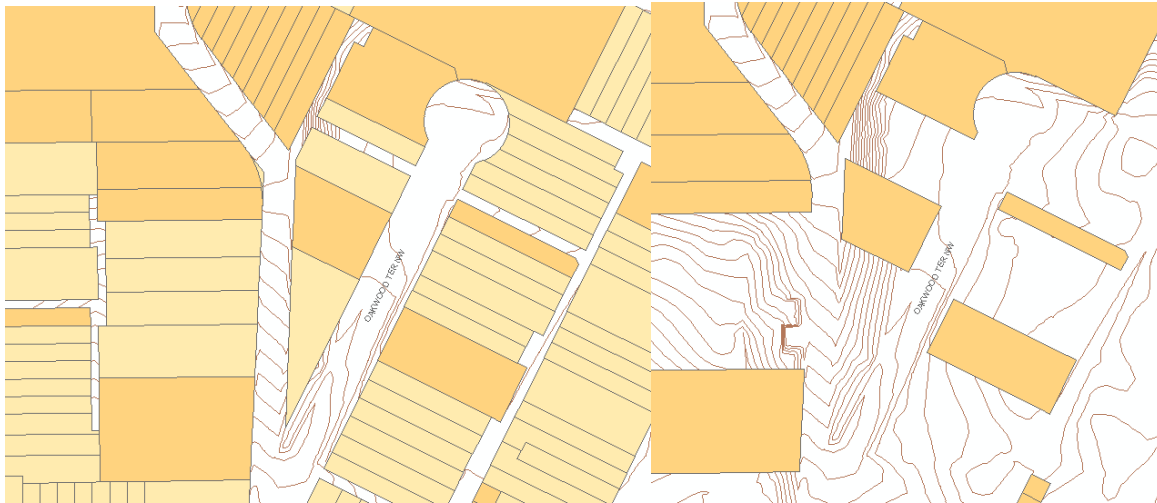
The property drops steeply to the west, toward 17th Street and the Rock Creek valley. The topography explains why this is perhaps the last unbuilt parcel in Mount Pleasant. The triangular lot would be divided into three, with the common property lines perpendicular to Oakwood Terrace. The houses would thus face Oakwood and, not as deep as the lots themselves, they would allow room for some parking on the 17th Street side and terraces or partial yards. The front yards would be very shallow, with only a few feet between sidewalk and building facades. This is necessitated by the limited depths of the lot, but also by the fact that pushing the buildings westward down the slope while maintaining the entrances at the Oakwood grade would require more extensive foundations.

The center lot would accommodate two attached units, as the R-4 zoning permits two-family "flats." The length of the southernmost house, squeezed by its narrow lot, would run perpendicular to the other houses, giving it a distinctive massing.

For reasons of retaining the site grade and enclosing the parking, there would be a very tall masonry wall on the 17th Street side of the site. The owner also proposes to construct a public sidewalk along 17th Street outside this wall. It would necessarily be quite narrow and steep.

Design

The three-story buildings would stand 35 feet tall from the Oakwood grade. The principal exterior material would be brick. The overall design vocabulary is contemporary, with large openings, planar surfaces, and lack of ornament. There is a notion of incorporating some narrow-exposure wood siding for texture.



Left: A GIS map detail showing the triangular subject property at center.

Right: The same view with the lot layer removed, showing the topographic contours (two-foot intervals)

The design incorporates punched window openings with (presumably metal) casements and ground-floor French doors. The applicant has presented two options for the facades of the center units, one with double French doors and punched window openings, and another with glazing in a more random pattern comprising most of the surface.

Evaluation

The spare, contemporary vocabulary of the proposed construction is sufficiently compatible with the character of the historic district and its predominant building type, a variety of rowhouses erected from the turn of the twentieth century to the mid twentieth century.

A development of this nature—on a challenging, hilly site, previously undeveloped—is bound to raise some concerns about visual effects on neighboring properties. One consideration is, of course, the prospect of the buildings looming over 17th Street. An examination of the context, however, shows that the houses on the west side of 17th directly opposite the subject property are elevated at a comparable height, considerably set back, and have their own, lower, off-street parking areas. If the new homes were instead proposed to be sunk to a height of three stories above the 17th Street grade, then two stories or less of the rear of the buildings would face higher existing buildings on Oakwood, and the lower floors of each would have no light from that direction. As planned, the new houses would relate well to the height of the Oakwood homes, which have a partial attic and stand on a high base because of the topography.

The applicant has accounted for the drop of 17th Street by introducing a setback of the rear of the northernmost rowhouse (providing an exterior terrace), so that it manages to step down partially while retaining a height on Oakwood consistent with the others. The openings for the rear doors and transoms are also taller to straddle the main and basement levels.

The property most affected by the project is the house immediately north of the site, because it faces south. Owned by the applicant, this 1932 home was oriented perpendicular to the street,

with a modest pedimented entrance facing a small yard and the treed slope. A few conditions mitigate this adjacency. First, there is twenty-foot distance between the existing and proposed construction, and this is the extent of the roughly level ground in front of the former. In addition, the vegetation and inaccessibility of the lot to the south of the house has already rendered the front yard a virtual side yard as seen from outside the property.

Several tweaks of the facades are recommended. First, the option with the smaller punched openings on the central units is much preferable to the option with the more extensive glazing. The latter, while incorporating some smaller-scaled elements, introduces a grander scale than is found elsewhere in these houses or in Mount Pleasant generally. In addition, the larger expanses of glazing, distinct from the other openings, are suggestive of stair towers and make the smaller units appear as the circulation cores of flanking multi-unit buildings. They defeat efforts to establish a rhythm of similar rowhouses, like the general pattern of the neighborhood.

It would probably be better, and more compatible, to reduce the number of doors on the fronts of the homes. The multiple French doors add confusion as to which would be the normal entry. More typical of rear elevations, but not completely unheard-of feature of a rowhouse façade, historic examples of multiple doors usually have more significant mediating spaces or structures—such as porches—between the public space and the home’s interior. The proximity of so much glass to the public way suggests that occupants would retrofit the openings with screening for privacy and security. The prospect of doors across the face of the majority of the buildings indicates a likelihood that there would be little, if any, green space maintained in front of them.

It may be useful to anticipate future residents’ likely interest in having an overhang at the entrance. The Historic Preservation Office often receives applications to retrofit similar entrances with coverings. Especially if there are to be multiple doors, a canopy could serve a second function signalling the actual entrance. Although there is insufficient space for a true porch, as most Mount Pleasant rowhouses have, repeating canopies on at least the northern three units would be analogous to porches and reinforce the relationship among the buildings, much as at the modern rowhouses on the north side of Harvard Street.

The proposed retaining wall would be most compatible if it were faced with the irregular granite used for such walls in public space during the early twentieth century. The most similar instance to the proposed are the very high walls on Adams Mill Road. The wall would probably be better if even a bit taller where it meets the rear yards of the northern and southern units, so that it becomes a parapet enclosing the yard and replaces much of the rail. This would better integrate the terrace into the topography; the rail perched prominently atop of the wall associates the wall more with the architecture of the house than with the topography.

Details of the masonry of the retaining wall and the homes, and the nature of the possible siding, require further exploration.

Recommendation

The staff recommends that the Board approve the concept, including the overall site plan, height and massing of the homes and retaining wall, with some revision as suggested above.